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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the feasibility of using focus groups to assess how scholastic publications can better meet high school student bodies' readership wishes and requirements. The paper relates high school journalism to implications of a bibliographic summary of focus group research and explication of one focus group research project dealing with communication and in-house publications in a public school setting. The paper suggests that the focus group method can be a useful tool for scholastic publications staffs and high school student populations; notes special circumstances inherent in researching public school populations; and points out one area where the greatest benefits of focus groups for high school journalism may lie--assessing the effectiveness of school publications. The paper also suggests that future research could help high school journalists improve their publications. Contains 23 references. (RS)

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Can We Talk?
Focus Groups and Scholastic Journalism:
A Research Analysis

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Abstract

This research analysis explores the feasibility of using focus groups to assess how scholastic publications can better meet high school student bodies' readership wishes and requirements. The implications of a bibliographic summary of focus group research and explication of one focus-group research project dealing with communication and in-house publications in a public school setting were related to high school journalism. The analysis revealed the focus group method can be a useful tool for scholastic publications staffs and high school student populations; but notes special circumstances inherent in researching public school populations and points out one area where the greatest benefits of focus groups for high school journalism may lie.

Can We Talk?
Focus Groups and Scholastic Journalism: A Research Analysis

Introduction

While professional newspapers have become successively more market-driven during the past years, there is little talk about the subject of the audience or readership at the high school level And, almost no opportunities exist for high school student bodies to talk with staffs in any organized way about communication issues. Still, increasing and satisfying readership is a central part of the work of scholastic journalism.

Over the years, little research has been conducted in any areas of scholastic journalism, despite the fact that secondary-school journalism programs remain a vital element within public education. Lack of funding and lack of outlets for publication of research results may contribute to the scarcity of scholastic journalism studies. What work has been done in this area, generally, was concentrated on the following: the characteristics of high school students (Dvorak, 1992; Green, Odom & Tsai, 1991; Vander Heyden, 1989) , their teachers (Arnold, 1980; Weaver, 1988; Whittle, 1983), secondary-level journalism curricula (Bowles, 1980; Day & Butler, 1989) and university programs for secondary education (Iorio and Garner, 1988; Hochheimer, 1991).

While these studies have been useful, little of this research attention has been directed toward helping high school publications nor featured in academic and educational publications directed toward scholastic journalism. A cursory review of high school texts revealed only *Scholastic Journalism* by English and Hach (1986) devoted space to the subject of gathering information on students attitudes, opinions, and beliefs about the publications that served them. The English and Hach text, however, offers only a brief discussion of the role of readership analysis. The text focuses primarily on research for gathering consumer information rather than readership concerns. The authors direct their attention to outlining survey construction, implementation, and analysis techniques as they might be used by high school staffs.

Even though the English and Hach text does introduce the topic of newspaper research, it does not sufficiently address the

function of newspaper audience research in secondary school settings, neither does it devote any space to qualitative forms of audience research for high school staffs. Since virtually no substantive research has used qualitative methods to study the high school audience's needs or explained how these methods could be utilized by high school staffs to help their publications, this research was designed to address those areas.

The purpose of this research analysis is to explore the feasibility of one qualitative method, the focus group, and its use in assessing how high school staffs can meet the student body's readership wishes and requirements. The investigative design is exploratory and twofold. First, the use of focus groups in audience research will be reviewed. Second, an example of focus-group research with employees in a public school setting will be explicated. Following that, the implications of the bibliographic summary and the focus group project.

Using Focus Groups to Study Audiences

Historically, research in the area of scholastic journalism, as in the broader field of communication studies, has been dominated by quantitative methods. Attention has centered on numerical examination with emphasis on data comparison. In recent years, however, there has been a growing emphasis on qualitative interpretation (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991), in part, as a response to criticism that communication research was too far removed from the processes of communication (Byers & Wilcox, 1991). Interpreting the world as seen by the respondents is the hallmark of qualitative research (Patton, 1990). The qualitative method rests on analysis that investigates individuals' action within their daily lives. The researcher engages the research respondents using a variety interactive methods. Oral history, ethnography, in-depth interview, focused interview, and focus group interview are common techniques for data collection. Of these techniques, focus group interviews have featured prominently in substantive research for newspapers and other forms of print journalism (Bogart, 1989, Morgan, 1988).

Focus groups usually are made up of more than four and less than 15 participants who are selected on the basis of some important similarity--age, social class, gender, interests, or other

criteria (Byers & Wilcox, 1991; Krueger, 1994). The group meets to generate a structured conversation that is centered around certain topics. The group is facilitated by a moderator who seeks to obtain significant experiences from the group that are germane to the topic or topics of interest. The skills of the moderator are crucial to the success of the method, whether the design demands the moderator take an overt leadership or less directive role in the group. Groups which generate the most useful data are usually those in which the participants and moderator share basic commonalties whether demographic or in interest. The responses of the groups are recorded for analysis later. Generally, a minimum of three focus groups are held for any one research project in order to get a wide enough range of data so that comparison across groups can be made for verification (Byers & Wilcox, 1991, Krueger, 1994).

Among the first to use focus groups to study communication were Merton and Kendall (1946) to study the effects of propaganda during World War II. Lazarsfeld (1972) transferred the technique from communication into marketing research, and market research remains, today, the area where most focus group research is concentrated (Morgan, 1988). The focus group technique lends itself well to audience studies and, in the past, focus groups have been used to gather valuable information about media audiences in general (Valenti & Ferguson, 1991; Bogart, 1989) as well as information about individual publications (Merton, 1987; Merton, Fisk, & Kendall, 1990; Wimmer & Dominick, 1991).

The method does have distinct characteristics overall that result in advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are the immediacy, range, and feedback of the responses gathered and the speed of completion of the research. The disadvantages are the lack of specific, quantifiable, and generalizable data. The effect of these characteristics are altered somewhat depending on the nature of the research subject undertaken. In using focus groups to learn readers' assessments of publications, the benefits and drawbacks can be explained more precisely. The benefits include:

1) Amount and interpretability of data. Focus groups generate a great deal of new and useful data. Direct input from the individuals interviewed is natural and often does not repeat the "wisdom" already known or published about the subject under

investigation (Morgan, 1988). The respondents are less inhibited by the process, whereas other forms (principally quantitative surveys) restrict responses to dichotomous or abbreviated replies (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991).

2) Design and conduct. The design and conduct of focus groups is flexible (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991; Morgan, 1988; Morgan, 1993). Probes for further detail and follow-up on questions are less rigid than in other research designs and may be instigated at the time they are raised. Also, topics may be explored that are not on the prepared list of questions. Furthermore, new avenues can be opened and explored with ease (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991; Morgan, 1988; Morgan, 1993) .

3) Organization. Focus groups can be organized and conducted quickly. Examples of publications and/or proposed changes can be presented easily. In addition, the focus groups often are less costly than surveys or in-depth interviewing (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990); nevertheless, expensive costs can be incurred when focus group members are paid for participating. Compensation usually ranges upward from $25 per one, one-half- to one-hour session.

The drawbacks of using focus groups for audience studies of publications are

1) Lack of "hard" data. These focus groups are not suited to gather some types of information. For example, information gathered, as in all focus group research, cannot be quantified. The method will not provide answers that translate to exact numbers and percentages (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991; Morgan, 1988; Morgan, 1993); therefore, comparisons about characteristics of the publications cannot be made on the numerical data collected.

2) Small sample sizes. Groups of four to 15 people small enough to share meaningful conversation are not large enough to be representative of the population from which they were drawn (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991; Morgan, 1988; Morgan, 1993; Byers & Wilcox, 1991). While insights into impressions and opinions about the publications can be garnered, learning how attitudes of a variety demographic groups apply to a particular theme or subject discovered in the research is extremely difficult. Researchers should be careful to look for trends rather than find conclusions in

data collected from focus groups.

3) Controversial data. The empirical rigor of the data collected from the focus groups may be challenged. It is possible the data generated may be compromised by the group's members, moderator, or the process itself. For example, the respondents may develop the tendency to conform to each other's responses, respondents may not know enough about a topic to discuss it, moderators may not be trained and able to guide or control the discussion, or the sheer number of issues discussed may fragment the discussion (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991; Morgan, 1988; Morgan, 1993; Byers & Wilcox, 1991).

Techniques for analyzing focus group sessions are varied. The unit of analysis is always the group (Morgan, 1988); however, the data itself is often of greater interest than the comparisons. Audience research may make use of either category of information, but research specifically related to publications often falls into the first category mentioned. In either case, the needs of some studies are simple and can be met by simply summarizing the data collected--provided that a thorough interview guide was written and followed by the moderator(s). Other studies require more subtle interpretation; for these studies, a system of coding is worked out based on categories--schemata--constructed from the frequency, intensity, specificity, and range of the participants' responses (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Merton & Kendall, 1946) . Once the categories are determined and data coded, an analysis is made by interpreting the consistency and tone of the responses.

Focus group research is one of a number of qualitative methods that are part of a broad and growing movement which looks at all of communication as interpretative and emerging from the interaction of the participants. The method does have particular weaknesses related to producing certain types of information and analysis is subjective rather than quantifiable; nevertheless, in recent years, audience research has benefited from focus group research. The focus group as a qualitative method has been applied to newspaper audiences, but its practicality and usefulness for audience studies of high school populations and their publications as yet has not been tested.

Conducting Focus Group Research in a Public School Setting

In order to gain insight into how focus groups might be used in high school journalism, the following section of this study will explicate a completed focus-group research project. The project investigated in-house publications in a public school setting and looked into employees' opinions about the school's system of communication. Both audience opinion and publication effectiveness were addressed in the research. The implications of the study for scholastic journalism will be presented in a separate section which follows the description of the research below.

The Example Study

A school district in a Midwestern city with a population of 350,000 commissioned researchers at local university to gather information on how the system of communication worked within the district. To that end, six focus groups comprised of a cross-section of district employees were conducted in November 1993. The objectives of these groups were fourfold: to learn how employees utilize information sources within the district, to learn how information flows up and down the system's ladder of communication, to learn how employees find out about district issues, and to learn employees' attitudes toward the district's three publications--a weekly newsletter for all employees, a bi-monthly summary of board-of-education meetings, and a monthly newsletter for the administrative staff.

The sessions proved to be spirited and frank and the prevailing attitude, positive. The sessions produced a great deal of data on district's communication. Many participants voiced appreciation for having their input solicited.

The Example Method

The sample was drawn from three telephone lists compiled by the school district and given to the researchers. From the district's 7,349 employees, the names of 320 were randomly selected by the district's research coordinator. The first list of 20 names was used to recruit participants for a pretest. If a person was not home when telephoned, messages were left when possible, and up to two call backs were made. The 150 names on the second list were called back once if they were not reached initially. The 150 names on the third list were called once.

Many people did not return the researcher's phone calls. Others simply hung up. Those who declined to participate cited a number of reasons for doing so. They included: busy schedules, no prior knowledge of the study (such as articles about it in district publications), being new to the district and not having had time to formulate opinions. Attitudes evidenced by such comments as "You don't bite the hand that feeds you" and "It's best not to make waves," also were raised as reasons for not participating.

Of the 320 people called, 55 agreed to participate. Letters of reminder were mailed prior to meetings and confirmation phone calls were made the night before a group's meeting. There was a significant number of no shows nonetheless. Of the 55 who said they would participate, 32 - 10 percent of the number initially contacted - showed up. This low number could be attributed in part to conflicts with after-school events which were numerous during the time the interviews were scheduled, and, at one meeting, a school employee telling several participants who stopped to ask directions that the focus group was not meeting.

The purpose of the first session was to validate the interview guide. The interview progressed as planned and participants corroborated our assessment that the questions were clear and comprehensive. Since no changes were found to be necessary, the interview guide was implemented as written and the pretest was included as a sixth focus group.

The principal investigator provided the team with academic readings on the procedures to be used and written instructions specific to the USD 259 project. The researchers attended a training session to prepare them for their work. Each focus group session conducted had one discussion leader who later wrote an overall analysis of the group and a recorder who taped each session, took notes during the sessions, and used a coding sheet developed for the project to enter data gleaned from the interviews.

At the beginning of each hour-long focus group, each participant read and signed a release form on the assurance that their names were not recorded. They were told, however, that one list of the names of all who participated in the sessions would be given to the district. This procedure to ensure strict confidentiality facilitated an open dialogue.

The group sessions got underway with asking participants to write down ways in which they communicate within the system. Members of the group then took turns telling what they had jotted down. This served to get everyone on record before a group consensus formed and stifled divergent views. The discussion then was opened up to a more wide-ranging exploration of what constitutes a communication system and the ways individuals use a system. The moderator steered the group's interaction to cover as much territory and to hear as many different views as possible within the allotted time period. Specificity was encouraged. After five minutes or so of open discussion, the moderator began narrowing the discussion through more pointed probing. After all the focus groups were completed, one student researcher combined data from the tapes, analysis summaries, and coding sheets, and wrote a summary of all the groups. Another went over the same sources and an outline prepared by the principal investigator and put together a first-draft summary which became the basis of the written report. The cross checking and analysis led to drawing the most salient themes from the discussion offered by the groups.

The Findings of the School District Study

The discussion below is an abbreviated compilation of the study's findings. It is put together as answers to the questions posed by the focus-group leaders and drawn up in the order that the interview guide was presented to the focus groups. All questions and responses are summarized, but a more detailed account of the reactions to the district's publications is given, since these questions and responses more closely parallel scholastic publications. The summaries of the findings are intended to show the range, depth, and categories of responses that can be obtained from focus-group research in a public school setting. The questions and their response were

How do employees utilize information sources within the district?

By working through channels. Most groups were positive about the openness of communication in the new administration (a new school superintendent had been on the job for about a year when the research was begun). Most participants cited the local media -- the daily newspaper and local television news -- as sources for factual, neutral reporting on school board meetings and issues. Electronic mail is a prime source of information from the central

office. Secretaries disseminate the information that comes through, and most people said this system is working well. There was a high degree of positive consensus about the new superintendent. "Tell (him) he's doing a good job," one man said. While participants said that communication is improving under the new administration and that they feel their voices are heard and respected, they still want better links with administrators. Participants also said there are those who have yet to be won over by the new superintendent. It will take time, they said, to completely heal the rifts of the past.

Recommendation: Keep up the good work!

How does information flow up and down the ladder?

While most communication still travels down from the top, most people said that when there is a need to communicate, they can go up the ladder, either to a supervisor, the district coordinator, or the union. They said there are numerous channels for upward communication, and most said they feel free to use them.

Important events? The local newspaper and television stations, posters, school signs, and staff meetings were some of the sources cited. The back page of the *InterCom* used to be a prime source of information about plays, musicals, and other events.

What's not covered that should be? Most areas of concern to employees were being covered by some form of communication. In fact, participants complained that there was too much information distributed. Some issues, however, particularly ones of safety, are not always adequately communicated, they said. "Sometimes we don't hear about things like a drive-by shooting," one person said. Teachers want pertinent information about their students: "You're not told if a kid who was transferred to your class has a history of violence, "another person said.

How much faith do you have in the information that comes across the system? "Pretty adequate" is the response that best reflects most participants' opinion about the information they receive from the district. Sometimes, they say, the information could be more complete or timely, but they consider it credible. Bulletins, especially, were said to be accurate.

There was consensus that the district needs to do get more favorable news coverage. There are many positive things

happening in the public schools, participants said, and they want to see those things reported by the local media.

Recommendation: For the most part, employees said communication flowed fairly smoothly through the system, but employees wanted to know about important changes before the general public. They preferred not to learn about major changes that affect their jobs through radio, TV, or the newspaper, but to hear about them from the district's administration. Announce changes prior to information being published or broadcast. When this is not possible, send an official district notification as soon as possible to explain and clarify media accounts. Even though it may be difficult work for more positive press about the school in local news outlets.

How do employees find out about district issues?

From the local newspaper, radio, TV, public service cable access, *Intercom*, *The Leader*, *BOE Gist*, bulletins, announcements, electronic mail, and the grapevine. Employees said they use a variety of different sources to get different information and understood the benefits and limitations of the sources. Teachers' unions -- the National Education Association and the local Federation of Teachers -- are prime sources of information about major issues in the district. Local newspapers, television, and radio provide coverage that ranges from in-depth analysis to scanty stories that contain little more than a quote or two from those involved. The grapevine is another referral source, supplying information on everything from tenure issues to evaluations on how the former superintendent is doing in his new job in Maryland.

Recommendation: Overall, the type of information now provided is well received and utilized by employees. Coverage is more than adequate. Be active in setting the agenda for the interpretation of issues that come across as negative in the press. Use district publications, memos, bulletins, etc. to explain to employees and set the district's "spin" on issues. Especially when employees learn about major events or changes through the media, the district can follow-up with their own version of what has happened.

What are employees attitudes toward the district's three publications?

The InterCom? The *InterCom* is well received, well read and trusted. The attitude of most participants was, "If it's not broke, don't fix it." They said they like its format, length, and content and consider it a useful, though biased, source of news. Participants were appreciative of its positive slant and said it consistently serves as a morale booster. "It's like a pat on the back," said one employee. "It makes us feel better," said another. Most people said they wished more of the positive stories that appear in the *InterCom* could find their way into the mainstream media.

The *InterCom* serves to keep employees in touch with what has been going on in the district. Participants said they like to hear about schools where they have previously taught and about people with whom they've worked. One woman said, "I just adore what they have and choose to put in." Another person added, "It gives schools the opportunity to brag about themselves." Several people did suggest, however, that the *InterCom* try harder to include a diversity of people and schools, as it sometimes seems to focus on the same people and schools. One participant was quite concerned, however, that the *InterCom* carried stories of learning disabled students and labeled them as such, a practice, he believed violated federal law.

Participants said they recognize that the InterCom is a house organ, but they read it for what it is: good news about their educational community. They know the media can be more critical of school district leaders and policies, than can district-produced publications. For the scoop, participants said they turn to the pages of the city's daily newspaper not to the *InterCom*.

As far as recommendations for change, there were few. Participants did say, however, that summaries are preferred over longer articles, that articles should be succinct and to the point, and the publication should include more information about upcoming events and job openings.

Few people expressed dislike for the *InterCom*. Still, but it had its critics. "The stories are mostly fluff," said one person. Another person said the InterCom does not warrant more than "a five-minute read." Someone added that he does not read it, because it ignores his area of teaching: "There's nothing in there that deals with post-secondary or vocational education."

The Leader. *The Leader*, which is targeted to administrators, was either not known to or viewed as redundant by the focus group participants who had read it. (Due to random sampling, only two of the focus group participants were administrators.) Several people said they could not remember the last time they had read it, and they were not particularly interested in having access to it in the future. Office workers were more interested in *The Leader* than other participants. Some people said they do not read *The Leader*, but file it in case they need to refer to it, which they seldom find necessary.

Some people said they would read *The Leader* if it were sent to them, while most others said that rather than send *The Leader* to everyone, it should be summarized and combined with the *InterCom*, or posted in a highly trafficked area (such as by the school's copy machine), or given to each school's secretary.

BOE Gist The majority of the participants had not seen *BOE Gist*, so there were few comments about it. One woman who has worked for USD 259 for 28 years had never heard of *BOE Gist*. However, they all said they would like to have access to it. They did not think it was necessary that every employee be given a copy, but they thought it would be a good idea to post it in a common area, such as a faculty lounge, or to have board meeting minutes and upcoming agendas summarized in the *InterCom*. They were especially interested in knowing about the school board's agenda prior to meetings and hearing about board action as soon as possible after meetings.

In summary, the *InterCom* got high marks from employees. Most had not seen *The Leader* or *BOE Gist*. Employees were interested in learning more about what goes on at school board meetings. They especially wanted to know agendas prior to the meetings. On the other hand, virtually no one wanted to read all of the information in *BOE Gist*. They suggested having it posted in school offices or in other places accessible to employees. *The Leader* also was unfamiliar to employees. When they were told about it, most wanted its information in a more brief form or said they did not find it essential. But, office workers, as a subgroup were interested in *The Leader* because they said they needed some of the information in it to do their jobs.

Recommendations:

InterCom

*keep up the good work

*Include notices about future events and job openings.

*Write concise, brief articles.

*Continue its positive bent.

*Include a diversity of people and schools.

*Denote important information.

*Include school board information and issues.

The Leader

*Post or keep a copy in a common area.

*Keep as brief as possible.

*Administer focus groups with its target audience. Identify subgroups, such as office workers, which might need the information distributed in *The Leader*.

BOE Gist

*Post or keep a copy in a common area.

*Keep as brief as possible.

*Provide employees with agendas prior to meetings.

*Since employees in general don't use this publication, learn to whom it is important.

Summary of the Public School District Study

Focus group members all recognized the need for better, but not necessarily more, communication within the school district. Almost to a person, they said that the amount of information received daily is snowballing into an unmanageable amount. A recurring theme was for the district to condense and reduce the redundancies within its publications. Memos and paperwork flood the system, they said, drowning essential information with minutia. Participants said they lack the time to sort through this information deluge. They want the district to help them by targeting groups for specific information, while still providing access to a wide range of information. Electronic-mail was highly praised as a means to accomplish this.

The resounding consensus was that short, efficient, one-page newsletters are better than wordy, multi-page

publications (although most people excluded the *InterCom* from this one-page rule). They don't necessarily want to be sent every publication, but they would like to have access to them by having the publications posted or kept in a common area. It also was suggested that a check sheet be sent around once a year so district employees can mark the publications they want to receive. District employees realize that there are many channels of communication, and two of their primary channels seem to be the *Intercom* and the daily newspaper. They recognize the differences and the usefulness of these two quite divergent publications.

Communication within the district is on the right road but is not yet where it should be, according to participants. Communication should be able to travel from bottom to top, and vice versa, unimpeded. Still, there is a hopeful attitude about the district's future and a belief that the current confusion and communication jams will clear up given time. The new superintendent has taken great strides toward improving communication within the district participants said. Judging from attitudes expressed in these focus groups, a healthy dialogue is underway.

Analysis

The wealth of information obtained from the focus groups conducted for the school district implies opportunity for high school journalism staffs to use focus groups to help their own publications. The review of the literature on focus-group research and the results of the aforementioned study provide a basis for judging how successfully the method can be used successfully to enhance scholastic publications. The following will discuss the benefits and pitfalls apparent in applying the focus group method to high school journalism. Next, the results of the school district focus group research will be analyzed for its implications. Finally, a summary will be made of the benefits and drawbacks of using focus groups to help high school publications.

Applying the method

The strength of the focus group method is that it provides fast, comprehensive information on a topic(s) in a way that does not restrict responses from participants. In focus groups, the direction of the research inquiry can shift readily to accommodate new

avenues of interest as they are presented by the participants, and feedback is immediate. These attributes of focus groups would seem to make them ideally suited as a forum for learning high school students' communication concerns.

The structure of the sessions is flexible and accommodates youthful informality. The flexible organization of the groups lends itself to both overbooked teenage schedules and modes of youthful expression. The students are not bound to produce details on lengthy questionnaires or remember to return them. Students can "brainstorm" their responses "on the spot."

Qualified and trained moderators are vital to focus group research, precisely because focus group participants are less inhibited in responding. Reigning in the voluminous responses produced in the focus-group setting is a challenging prospect for a research moderator under routine circumstances. Riding herd on teenage participants poses an even greater challenge. Opening the discussion to generate numerous responses on various topics, keeping the discussion on track, preventing the monopolization of the group by one or two participants, getting full participation for each person in the group--all are tasks which require a trained facilitator. Accomplishing these tasks with typically exuberant high schoolers pose a greater challenge. In addition, focus-group members, regardless of age, have been known to parrot each other's comments, each offering essentially the same response. It is anticipated that duplication of responses might be prevalent among teenagers because of peer-group pressure to respond in a manner acceptable to other group members. In the past, moderators have effectively dissipated this problem by distributing paper and pencil at the beginning of the group session, then asking each person to write down his or her initial response. By asking everyone in turn to read what was written, the moderator effectively negates the duplication of initial responses and gets everyone to contribute to the group at the outset.

That moderators need to be strictly neutral in order to perform their functions should be obvious. Because the research design demands neutrality, most often moderators are not known to the group prior to the beginning of the interviews. The best moderator is one not previously involved with the participants.

Yet, at the same time, the best moderator also is one whose own social world mirrors that of the group members.

For focus groups comprised of young people, a young person would seem the most advantageous choice as moderator. But, the skills required of the moderator seem to preclude the choice of almost all young people for this role. One answer to the dilemma might be for high school staffs who want to use focus group research to recruit young graduate students from nearby universities to conduct the groups for the staffs. Another solution might be to bring in publications staff members from neighboring high schools to conduct the groups. Group leadership could be exchanged among a number of schools and analysis made by still a different person, so that the information gathered would remain confidential both for the participants and for the school's publication being studied. In order for this process to work, extensive training in moderating skills would need to be done in workshops led by an experienced researcher.

The analysis of the focus groups also presents a challenge. It might be possible for a school's adviser to analyze data collected and coded by others, but it would be of greater benefit for a neutral third party to summarize and draw conclusions based only on the data collected from the group interviews. Finding a person willing to take on such a responsibility might be difficult, but these duties might also be shared among advisers who would write their reports based on unlabeled data.

The benefits of using the focus group method are many. Focus groups can let a staff know how well their publication is doing; what other students like, dislike, and want changed; and how the student body views the communication that goes on within the school. Focus groups are well suited to the life styles of today's teenagers, but they pose problems in implementation. The two biggest concerns regarding focus group use for high school publications are 1) the need for well trained, neutral moderators with whom the groups can identify, and 2) the need for an unbiased analysis of the data collected. Both of these problems may be addressed by employing outside consultants to do the research or, in a more cost-effective manner, through cooperative associations among student publications staffs and their advisers.

Lessons from public school focus groups

The focus groups conducted for the school district yielded two categories of information: 1) audience opinion on communication within the district and 2) the effectiveness of the school district's publications. The results indicated that focus groups could be useful for high school journalism in both areas. The results imply that for overall assessments of student publications--the second of the two categories--the method may be more useful.

A greater understanding of student-body reaction to the format, including the length of the publications and the content of the newspaper, yearbook, or school magazine, could be easily obtained through focus group research. Overall, readership levels for the different publications and readership levels for different categories of stories and art types published also are types of information that easily may be collected. Focus groups also could reveal the subject matter and art most well received by students. The data works well for those wishing to gather impressions from participants. The data can serve as preliminary findings on which to build survey questionnaires and other research instruments.

Aside from the overall assessment of data. Staffs could look within and among the focus groups to gather a different type of information. Comparison of groups could identify minority group interest in the publications and give some insight as to the best methods of publication distribution. This type of group analysis could also suggest the "tone" or editorial policy the student body expects, enjoys, or wants from school publications. The adults interviewed in the foregoing research recognized their in-house publications were primarily public relations tools for the school district; nevertheless, in general, they praised the publications. They requested the publication philosophy remain unchanged. How high school students appraise the public relations function of the student press would be interesting to learn, as well as what expectations high school students overall hold about freedom of the press issues for student journalists. The focus groups appeared to be well suited to draw out assessments of the publications' functions and recommendations for change in the publications, for both school district workers and public school students.

There were some indications that the focus group method

may pose difficulties for high school research along some lines of audience assessment of communication within the system. As the school district project progressed it was noted that the more abstract the ideas brought up in the focus group setting the more difficulty the participants had in formulating responses. Questions regarding the information flow in the district, including sources and reliability of information particularly omissions in coverage, brought blank stares from some and "hems and haws" from others. How information moves through the school system appeared to be something most participants did not spend a great deal of their time thinking about. It took several minutes and repeated probes from moderators before conversation on the topic could begin. While the adults interviewed did eventually formulate assessments of communication, high school students, because of their distance from and lack of input into the official system of communication within the school, may have even more difficulty with this topic than did the adults. Getting any sort of picture of a system's processes may be beyond the scope of the immediate responses of high school students generated in focus groups. On the other hand, high school students may have unique observations about the informal methods of communication within a school system. Specific observations about how information moves among students and between students and the system might yield all sorts of knowledge quite helpful to publications staffs. Care should be taken in designing focus-group research that attempts to elicit opinion from high school students regarding processes of communication. Assessments of publications' functions and performance may well be far more easily obtained.

Finally, there was one unexpected finding of the research that may certainly be of benefit to high school journalism staffs. That was the participants' overwhelming positive reception to the research. The focus groups appeared to have an immediate positive public relations effective even before the data could be collected, analyzed, and results implemented. At the initial meeting of the groups, respondents often began by saying they never thought they'd have a forum in which to express themselves to those "in change." Many thanked the moderators repeatedly for the opportunity to share their views.

Synthesis

Can we talk? A review of the literature on focus-group research and a review of a focus group project conducted in a public school setting indicate that the method can be a useful tool to open up talk among publications staffs and the high school student population. In using focus groups, strict adherence to certain aspects of the methodology, primarily the selection and training of moderators and the analysis of data, should be taken insure the validity and reliability. Secondly, indications are strong that information on the publications rather than more abstract knowledge of communication within the school system will be more easily obtained by the method. Overall, the value of focus groups for high school publications staffs may lie more in the direction of assessing the effectiveness of school publications than in explicating a complete picture of a school's communication processes. From the perspective of this research, the benefits derived from learning student-body attitudes toward the content, format, and underlying philosophy of the student press are well worth the effort of organizing high school level focus groups. Opening up avenues of talk between students and staff through focus groups can produce valuable information about the audience, enhance publication content, and increase readership of student publications.

The immediate task for future research is testing the veracity of the focus group method for scholastic publications. The larger task for future research is to help high school journalists improve their publications. Finding ways student journalists can effectively and cost-efficiently use empirical methods to learn about their audiences is paramount in moving toward that goal.

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